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EMBODIED DISEASE: FEMININITY, DOMINATION, AND DE SADE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis offers a new reading of a libertine tradition that is continuously producing a poetics of the body, organizing itself around sexuality and disease. Previous scholarship has acknowledged the eighteenth-century trope of the diseased and sexualized woman as an effect of corruption, an effect of indulgence, and so on. However, I attend to the diseased woman as a formation by and through the material, as an effect of disease. I ask: what does it mean when disease becomes a vector between the hyper-sexualized female form and Enlightenment thought? In what follows, I connect the physical human body to Enlightenment philosophy via a materialist framework that compels an interdisciplinary focus on organic and inorganic embodiment. Through the works of John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, Marquis de Sade, and William Blake, I show how women are animated by the physical energy of disease. Namely, that this material matter, its persistence and vitality, becomes a way for women to participate in and pass along a form of violence typically enacted against them. Ultimately, by tying people together in nonproductive ways, I propose that venereal disease is a form of collective power that challenges Enlightenment attitudes about progress and self-preservation.

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Introduction

The essence of enlightenment is the alternative whose ineradicability is that of domination. Men have always had to choose between their subjection to nature or the subjection of nature to the Self. —Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment

What does it mean to be the vector of disease? To resist institutional forms of chastity while contributing to public forms of commerce? To embody the foreign while standing for the failings of the national? To contain and offer life while transferring death? The figure of the eighteenth-century harlot is both revolutionary and destructive. She is paradox, generative in her contradictions, embodying new Enlightenment attitudes about progress and self-preservation. In some texts she suffers and in others she prospers—always sexualized and often diseased.

This paper is not interested in the occupation of harlotry so much as it uses the harlot to think more broadly about the naturalized implications of female sexuality and the hyper-sexualized female body. I begin by addressing the woman as an organic body shaped by and containing matter, a formation of *stuff* that transfers and disperses particles in its interaction with other bodies. In thinking about how the body transports and exchanges things, I am also interested in how the physical human form becomes a template or model for other material and immaterial forms. For instance, medical treatises of the period, such as French physician Jean Astruc's *A Treatise of Venereal Disease*, use materialism to characterize the epidemiology of disease, often referring to it as the "communication" of matter.[1] And yet, twentieth-century theorists such as Roland Barthes make metaphorical

[1] Jean Astruc, *A Treatise of Venereal Disease*, 139.

what physicians made literal. By also drawing on Lucretian materialism,[2] Barthes uses the material process of Epicurean physics, to provide a metaphor for the dissemination of knowledge.[3] Here, we find a figuration of philosophy as a tangible active substance that is transferred from body to body, developing and forming in unforeseeable combinations.

This paper takes cues from both the abstract and the literal by connecting the physical human body to Enlightenment philosophy via a materialist framework that compels an interdisciplinary focus on organic and inorganic embodiment. More specifically, I confront the Enlightenment's recurring trope of the diseased woman as a postulation of the sexualized body that emerges from developments in natural science and medicine. I begin by asking how epidemiological understandings of disease shape literary depictions of the physical human body? To be specific, what does it mean when disease becomes a vector between the hyper-sexualized female form and Enlightenment thought?

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[2] Lucretian materialism derives from Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, translated as "On the Nature of Things" (1 BCE), and communicates the laws of Epicurean physics. This pre-biological perspective of the material world suggests that all organic and inorganic processes can be explained through the interaction and formation of atomic particles. In terms of this paper, it is important to remember that atoms are irreducible and active particles that continue to develop and grow our material reality, not once but constantly. This materialist framework considers the various and uncontainable ways that physical human bodies transfer disease and how disease reshapes the material body across time and space.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola,* 9.

In what follows, I examine a variety of works from the Enlightenment period both in poetry and in prose. While some are well circulated others are lesser known, and they are all threaded together by the perniciousness of venereal disease. Rather, all works employ the figure of disease in order to make particular distinctions about the female body; namely, how the sexualized female body is leveraged to conform to, challenge, or resist a broader social subscription to natural philosophy.

Julie Peakman's *Mighty Lewd Books* delineates the development of natural philosophy as it attempts to explain pre-biological theories for the roles of male and female in reproduction. Those scientists that worked against the ideological heteronormative grain, such as William Harvey (1578-1657), published extensive accounts on germination that give primacy to the female in reproduction. His book *De Generatine* claims that there are plants and animals that reproduce spontaneously by seeds and eggs carried by the wind. By advancing a view of reproductive processes that centralized the functions of the anatomical female body, Harvey offered an unpopular image of impregnation that waives any need for a male counterpart.

In response to natural philosophers like Harvey, there emerged new scientific works that sought to reestablish the important role of males in reproduction. New findings of "eel-like animals" in semen and potent "spermatic worms" (spermatozoa) inevitably grounded women as "mere nourishers."[4] The female figure soon became only passively productive. A body to be drawn from, to be drained, a site only productive in its submission to the virile male.

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[4] Julie Peakman, *Mighty Lewd Books*, 81-82.

In support of this male driven system of reproduction, satirizers such as John Hill (1716-1775) use pornographic tropes to denounce scientists like Harvey and declare the crucial and thus obvious role of men in reproduction:

> The only Doubt now remaining with me was, whether Animalcula did really float about in the Air, and slide down the Throat as he described? for I had been used to think they were originally lodged in the Loins of Males . . . Here again I was at a Stand; all before me was Darkness and Doubt; I knew not if there were any such Animalcula, or, if there were, I supposed them too small to be discovered by the naked Eye; and though perhaps they might be discernible with the Help of a Microscope, yet I knew not where to seek those *opportune Place,* hinted at by the great Metaphysician.[5]

The process of reproduction needs no further inquiry, for males are more instrumental than the Metaphysician's microscope. By definition, pornographic fiction denaturalizes the process of reproduction, thus, the genre provides ample opportunity to comment on the limitations of the natural philosopher. In its form, it trades microscopes for members and animalcula for semen: making messy what science makes methodical.

This paper is interested in the way erotic poetics directly and indirectly remark on male-centric conceptions of physiology and epidemiology, often challenging any notion that centers the male in the process of reproduction. This project explores both poetry and prose but orients itself toward works in the libertine tradition, broadly construed. Specifically, it acknowledges libertinism as a commitment to a perspective on the female body as excessively material and infinitely available to men.

We often view the libertine as a promoter of excess and sexual pleasure, an advocate for what we can more aptly name as sexual nonreproduction. From this position, there is no merit in chastity, for there is no value in marriage as a moral determination. Additionally, there is no value in a legitimate right to inheritance for all women should be

[5] John Hill, *Lucine Sine Concubitu,* 9-10.

available to all men. These rakish works encourage *immaterial* rights to women, but also feverishly degrade the physical female form as something inferior to men. By harping on the foulness of the female body, lines such as "her belly is a bag of turds, / And her cunt a common shore"[6] become thematic ways to think about the materiality of the female figure, as revolting and yet illimitable.

To underwrite this argument, the female body is not made foul: it is naturally foul. A woman's body is not dirtied through its continuous contact with multiple men; in fact, even venereal disease can be disavowed from whom it was transmitted. For the libertine, there is a naturalness to the filth of the female body that aligns the material threat of syphilis with the material threat of menstruation. I work within this libertine framework in order to press on how the female body is framed as a naturally menacing form, and in what ways this form threatens the male-centric process of sexual nonreproduction.

In order to properly trace a libertine pedigree, this paper begins by exploring poems by John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester in order to argue that disease is an activation of the normally submissive female body, an unwelcome aggression leveraged on male models of desire and action. I suggest that this material animation shakes awake an immaterial consciousness better left outside the fluxing physical circuit. Rochester not only introduces us to the disruptive female body but sets us up to imagine the material as a form of power independent from consciousness.

As a whole, this project is largely preoccupied by Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom.* As I trace the pedigree of libertine poetics, it is *Philosophy* that anchors my observations with its frank vision of sexual violence as a political and philosophical

[6] John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, "On Mrs. Willis", 138.19-20.

metaphor. Scholars typically read *Philosophy* for Dolmance's speech, "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," and during the eighteenth-century, this piece was siphoned from the rest of the text and popularly circulated as its own pamphlet. We circumvent the rest of the book by separating the pornographic content from its political content, when in actuality, the erotic becomes political in the way it acts out the embedded friction between political desire and philosophical action. The pornographic is necessary because it offers a performance that illuminates the irony in what is being orated. I examine the text as a whole in order to holistically study how de Sade is not simply promoting libertinism but is cautioning against the period's complicity in a broader social philosophy.

I conclude this project with a brief reading of William Blake's "London", a poem that may seem to be out of place here but is actually crucial to showing a still-developing libertine tradition. I suggest that "London" is a space where the echoes of material abuse direct our attention to the egotistical and unguided philosophy of domination. "London" provides an exemplary picture of a society complicit in the generational transference of violence. Although the field may not normally associate William Blake with trends and commitments to the libertine, I hope this project provides a new reading of the poem that posits it among a literary ancestry ordering itself through sexuality and violence.

The Enlightenment unapologetically thrusts forward this didactic figure of the woman. Works ranging by content and medium, from Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* to William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*, provoke us to learn something from the sexualized female body. Whether we learn from the constraints of marriage or the corruptions of the nation, it seems as if everything and everyone has a hand in shaping the

sexualized woman. And yet, what seems to be missing is an exploration as to why this figure is developed and codified as diseased. Previous scholarship has acknowledged venereal disease as an effect of corruption, an effect of indulgence, and so on. Yet, not much work has been done to think about this woman as the inverse, as a formation by and through the material, as an effect of disease. Of course, this paper only begins to scratch the surface of a topic that is as expansive and dynamic as the material itself. However, I hope that this project provides an interdisciplinary way of reading this figure as not simply diseased but the *embodiment* of disease.

Sadeian Sexuality and the Enlightenment

That what fools call humaneness is nothing but a weakness born of fear and egoism; that this chimerical virtue, enslaving only weak men, is unknown to those whose character is formed by stoicism, courage, and philosophy. —Marquis de Sade, Philosophy in the Bedroom

Much more than a historical period, the Enlightenment was a philosophical development that attempted to instill virtue in lieu of religion and in response to new egalitarian politics. It is a period when the fundamental structures of physical existence were thrown up in the air as scientists looked for a new theory with which to organize life. Whether the period oriented us toward progress or directed us toward new systems of inequality is still up for debate; however, what scholarship does prove, is that the Enlightenment was a period so teeming and dynamic with possibility that we continue to assess its impact today.

What developed during this period is the phenomenon of practical reason, a form of thinking that is defined by the individual and shaped by impulse or drive. Under these terms, reason cannot be mudded by old ways of reasoning, and instead, must be redefined by the individual who remains free from other forces. For instance, if fear and enjoyment are always in response to something "sinful" or "virtuous", then it is up to reason to deduce what is morally "good" or "bad" and then for the rational person to guide himself by his own natural impulses. That is, "when the objective systematization of nature has been disposed of as prejudice and myth, nature remains only as a material mass," and so, even "thinking becomes an organic medium."[7] If what is material is amoral and thus natural,

[7] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 41.

then the natural organization of life gives primacy to the physical. That is, there is no strength in virtue, only strength in the physical potential of things, consequently, "self-preservation [becomes] the constitutive principle of science."[8]

In this spirit, Dolmancé, the leading male character of Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom,* denounces any form of universal rule for it is a "terrible injustice to require that men of unlike character all be ruled by the same law."[9] And to underscore this, Dolmancé argues that those who murder, thieve, or commit adultery are justified in their actions, as nature inspires the impulse to act, and provides the vigor for those acts to succeed. For Dolmancé, it is the weak who circumvent the potential of the strong by undermining nature's law, stifling the "energy essential to republican virtues."[10]

Thus, if we are to subscribe to Dolmance's way of reasoning, to restrict one's abilities is to deny what is particular to the individual and thus what is natural. The strong and the capable are the powerful, and are privileged for their natural ability to overcome what is weak. And yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer use de Sade to point out, philosophy fails to make the distinctions necessary to resist what eventually becomes totalitarian. The individual—regardless if we classify by person, species, or state—becomes a representation of power. Consequently, the ability to dominate and domination itself are presented as part of a natural organization of life, rather than harmful to life itself.

Although the politics of the Enlightenment sought to disperse power among the people, this gesture quickly fell behind a privileging of the individual. In *Philosophy,*

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[8] Horkheimer, 86.

[9] Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom,* 310.

[10] De Sade, 300.

Dolmance's monologue "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," alludes to the disjunction between philosophical thought and republican virtue. The character calls attention to what society seems to ignore: the same philosophies that motivated the French Revolution cannot harmoniously live in its new republic. That is, the Enlightenment, and its need to free itself from the bonds of religion, law, and morality, is inherently antithetical to the values of a republic that upholds "the state, the community, [and] the common good."[11] More to de Sade's point, no Enlightened man is truly interested in relinquishing his proprietary rights, for to share goods and live by one law would simply be against nature. More broadly, to abandon the rights of the individual is to defy a particular order that nature itself inspires.

Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic* suggests that de Sade illuminates a specific organization of life that is different, albeit familiar to us. It is an order encouraged by the individual with no substantial goal, advancing through excessive violence and motivated by a will to dominate everything—what we have here, as Anahid Nersessian more eloquently puts it, is the "mass idealization of the unrestrained and inexhaustibly available."[12]

This section introduces how Enlightenment philosophy, in its trend and tendency to control nature, extends to and includes the domination of women and female sexuality. It acknowledges women as both symbolically "natural" bodies and socially gendered bodies. By focusing on the turmoil happening within man—as compulsively freeing himself from authority yet uncontrollably keeping his thumb on everything else—I am able to think

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[11] "Republic, n." OED.

[12] Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited,* 12.

about the violent ways the female body is claimed and figured as a resource (whether a fruitful one or not) during a period defined by "self-destruction" and "social freedom."[13]

In order to think about how women are symbolically and materially claimed, I use Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in order to press harder on the topic of social domination: What does it mean to be dominated? How, to what extent, and by whom is violence inflicted? Is there any possibility to be liberated from or within this process? As a twentieth century text published in the wake of World War II, *Dialectic* is largely concerned with Enlightenment philosophy as a foundation for social domination. Particularly, the way reason develops into a permission to not just dominate but exterminate the Jewish population, as well as many others. More central to my project, Adorno and Horkheimer also create a parallel between those who are Jewish and those who are women. The two groups are joined together and marked as those who are intellectually and physically inferior, "bearing the brand of domination on [their] forehead."[14]

In order to delineate a connection between female sexuality and the compulsive need to control resources, *Dialectic* uses Marquis de Sade to show that the Enlightenment—in its relationship to women—becomes preoccupied by *what* women represent. De Sade's works are exemplary for this undertaking because they often operate around a central female character. In this position, characters such as Justine, Juliette, or Eugénie spew ideas about libertinism, its philosophies and amoralities. And yet, while maintaining her central location in the narrative, the Sadeian heroine either willingly or

[13] Horkheimer, xiii.

[14] Horkheimer, 112.

unwillingly is subjected to a flurry of violent acts against her. Soon, she is physically and ideologically overwhelmed by the strength of the male characters and thus consigned to her position, a "representative of her sex."[15] Throughout de Sade's oeuvre, men see her as standing for nature, as something to be relentlessly subsumed in the abstract, and subjected in the real.[16] The woman, as socially and symbolically inferior, becomes something for man to claim.

[15] Horkheimer, 112.

[16] Horkheimer, 111.

Rochester, Femininity, and Material power

But mark what creatures women are:
How infinitely vile, when fair!
—John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, A Ramble in St. James's Park

Someone Adorno and Horkheimer do not address but who is nonetheless an important predecessor to de Sade is John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester. Although Rochester favors violent language over violent action, I trace the libertine tradition through his work via its preoccupation with venereal disease. Moreover, Rochester offers us a place to start because he provides us an intimate assessment of action that we see more macroscopically in de Sade and Blake.

In his book, *Actions and Objects*, Jonathan Kramnick probes at consciousness and where it fits among a desire to claim and the physical action of claiming. Desire can be thought of as a motivating thought, a spurring that comes from inside the body, and actions fluidly follow through on these impulses. In this form, desire as an impulse and action as its immediate effect is an image found everywhere in libertine works. Consciousness interrupts this flux, "coming into the story only to gum up the machinery of the physical system."[17] In keeping with Kramnick, I explore Rochester to think about action and desire as a physical process perfected by its context and environment, here, images of matter "[have] no need of a mind to complete its causal circuit."[18]

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[17] Jonathan Kramnick, *Actions and Objects*, 113.

[18] Kramnick, 16; 144.

This reading gives primacy to the physical. So, while sexuality is freed from the fetters of religion, society, and law, it is no more than an elaborate function of the body, an action unconsciously followed through from A to Z. The libertine transforms sexuality into a material thing, dismembering the body into "pricks," "ballocks," and "arses." Yet, all these parts are enlisted without thought into the flurry of the physical circuit. For Rochester, what is sexually desirable is indivisible from sexual action. "Sexuality" is defined by physicality, by its uninhibited engagement between body parts and fluids, always active, and ideally separate from consciousness. In departing from Kramnick, I think about how context and environment are shaped by gendered models of desire and action. It is an idea I elaborate in the upcoming section, but for now address within Kramnick's framework. In these terms, male sexuality is permitted a fluidity from desire to action, and female sexuality is contextualized by its infinite availability and constant interaction with men.

The ideal environment for the libertine is an unconscious surrendering of the female body to man's unconscious sexual desires. Yet, in those moments when we see the glimmers of mental faculties, the speaker has been jolted out of the physical circuit by the foulness of the female body. Consequently, the libertine frames the filthiness of the woman as an offense to male desire. If actions are perfected by context and environment, the vile female body is an object positioned as an environmental obstacle.

Rochester's poetic form offers insight into sexuality as a material process dependent on a certain form of environment. Sexual interactions adopt a lyric quality that appear to be reliant on a harmonic and natural energy. Of course, Rochester is satirizing the personal by giving the material its own lyricism. Nevertheless, he also constructs a form that provides a rhythm conducive to the flow from desire to action:

While I, my passion to pursue,

Am whole nights taking in

The lusty juice of grapes, take you

The lusty juice of men.[19]

The lyrical is reserved for the material. Instead of a union made by love, the poem gives us a union of fluids; a passion satisfied by action rather than by consciousness or sentiment. The multiplicity of "grapes" parallels the "the lusty juice of *men,*" consequently characterizing sexuality by its boundless physical availability. The rake consumes as much of the material as passion permits and never skips a beat; even and up until the last line when he orders the female body—"take you"—as a carafe for the bounty of men's passions.

Conversely, the female body can also foster a more offensive environment that is less lyrical. Men, even a bounty of men and their passions, have no part in defiling the sexual environment. Instead, the female body naturally corrupts the atmosphere and requires additional "paper" and "spunges" to prepare itself to interact with men.[20] More explicitly, the women are expected to be consciously aware of male desire and action. They are responsible for self-cleaning which, in turn, cleanses the environment and ensures fluency for male sexuality: from male desire to male action. Women must surrender their own physical desires and actions for the ease of men. Without female consciousness, the female body corrodes male sexuality by "gumming up the machine," disrupting its lyric prosody:

My spotless flames can ne'er decay

[19] Rochester, "Song (early version)," 84. 21-24.

[20] Rochester, "Song," 139.7-8.

If after every close,

My smoking prick escape the fray

Without a bloody nose.[21]

Here, menstruation chops up the melodic consistency of physical action. A material interruption from the woman who should have consciously and actively attended to herself earlier on. And yet, this dilemma provides a new way to read the female form as materially active in an unsuspecting way: it is a body that threatens to extinguish the heat of desire by committing violence against the virility of man, by giving him a "bloody nose." Consequently, the female body is thought to be not just inherently filthy, but naturally aggressive, and must consciously work itself into submission for men. That is, women subdue and restrain their most natural and active qualities by consciously conforming to male models of desire and action. More specifically, the female body makes itself into a passive one: a body that is most advantageous contained and most vile when disruptive.

Poems such as this one show how the active and filthy female body become inextricably linked. The two appear at once and become an important way to think about how women's sexuality is ideal when it consciously subdues itself. In this vein, Rochester's figure of the prostitute is female sexuality gone awry, an example of the unrestrained, the belligerent, and the disobedient—a defiant object disrupting the steady machine of male desire and action. Rochester's poem "On Mrs. Willis" correlates a hypersexualized harlot to active contamination: "She rails and scolds when she lies down, / And curses when she spends."[22] Female sexuality uses disease to act out. The transferences of disease, the

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[21] Rochester, 139.9-12.

[22] Rochester, "On Mrs. Willis," 137.15-16.

"curses when she spends," are not simple disruptions but lethal and aggressive actions made by the female body.

In this reading, venereal disease is a complement to the naturally active and hostile female body. The diseased woman is a figure uncontained and disobedient, she curses and leaves men bloody. Her diseased body is most threatening because it foregoes consciousness and cleanliness, and thus naturally resists the libertine's model of male sexuality. And yet, with all the dissatisfaction toward women, their bodies, and their natural resistance to male desire and action, they are still worth the pursuit: "I'll change a mistress till I'm dead— / And fate change me to worms."[23]

As it is for the libertine, disease is a liability for the active female body, a forced foreclosure of female consciousness, a waiver of the possibility to contain and subdue itself. For Rochester, venereal disease is threatening because it means that women may no longer—or should no longer—surrender themselves to the desires of men. Its materiality changes the environment, and thus interrupts the flow from male desire to male action. Disease is a substance proper or indigenous to the female body, and it makes it permanently unruly and unmanageable. This is a notion de Sade draws on in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, reframing it in terms even more explicitly concerned with the problems of personal agency.

Just like the rake who cannot control the active materiality of the female body, de Sade further narrows the hope for any form of autonomy. *Philosophy* illuminates an important characteristic of disease, that is, the lack of agency in wielding disease as well as containing and transferring it. The individual body cannot consciously nor autonomously

[23] Rochester, "Against Constancy," 82.19-20.

transfer or refuse the toxic matter. This epidemiological understanding of disease shows us how futile the efforts are of the individual in comparison to the collective possibility of the natural. The organic body, in its collection of particles and configuration of matter, possesses a power that the individual simply does not.

I will now extend Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of de Sade by expanding the boundaries of violence and power to include, not just women under the control of men, but both men and women under a collective power of venereal disease. I believe that what de Sade begins to address through whips and flogs he effectively finishes through the destructive animation of disease. I hope this reading will show how the Enlightenment is not just a period fueled by the individual will to dominate; but rather, becomes an interrogation of individual human autonomy in light of the powerful collective body.

Although this may sound like I am trying to erase all of the violence that happens to the women in de Sade's works, my goal is not align the author with feminism nor argue that he has an earnest concern for women and their welfare. Instead, I emphasize that de Sade uses the female body in such a way that frames it as "natural," and thus symbolic of a collection of things: a collection of matter, of particles, of nerves. Thus, the woman in de Sade's works is not simply "the representatives of her sex" as I have pointed out before. Quite conversely, she is the representative of all organic things, including but not limited to her sex. The period's misguided position toward nature runs parallel to its position toward women, as things always available to take. My next section breaks down Adorno and Horkheimer's classification of male dominance in order to refashion a slightly different version of this model which advances disease as a form of power that weaves itself in and out of bodies, regardless if they are "male" or "female."

To begin this reconstruction, we must first understand what dominance is and where it comes from. Domination is defined by a divide: between one who has authority and one who yields to authority. In order to maintain control, one must always have something to command. *Philosophy in the Bedroom* offers a way to think about how philosophy not only divides the sexes but marks this division as crucial for organized life. In the final dialogue of the text, the group continues to brutalize the body of Madame de Mistival in excessive and unorganized ways. Although relentless in its violence, the group has only one intention, namely that she remain alive: "The suffering must increase gradually so as to not kill her off beforetimes."[24] As the inferior sex, women must remain alive so that they continue to be the subordinate group while men are the dominant. In the dichotomy of nature versus civilization, women are symbolic of nature and thus weakness, alienating men from these characteristics and isolating them in a position of strength.[25] Men are cornered by what they cannot be, and consequently lash out against it. This may sound as though men have a desire to be part of nature, when in fact—they fear it. Thus, the urge to dominate is a desire deeply rooted in panic.

This template shows how fear organizes life by transforming itself into an action that inevitably guarantees men a position of strength and dominance. More simply, "life" is organized through the threat of nature, and civilization maintains its position of dominance through nature's abuse. That is, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, the "fear and weakness [of women], the greater affinity to nature which perennial oppression produces

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[24] De Sade, 358.

[25] Horkheimer, 112.

in them, is the very element which gives them life."[26] It is the repressing of women that guarantees how and for what reason they live, while also, animating the metaphysics of life through the natural division of the sexes. As we saw with de Mistival earlier, Marquis De Sade uses sexual violence to personify a tireless play between enervation and revival, so even as de Mistival is fainting from the sheer violence, Dolmancé declares, "We'll flog her—that should restore her senses."[27]

Philosophy shows how keeping women on the brink of life is vital to the lives of men, providing a notion that men can live their "life to the full only in the collective."[28] Consequently, there is something jarring about the potential of women, as "uncivilized" and thus indirectly threatening to men. Perhaps, more importantly, men's dependence on circumscribed women shapes our broader human existence. To think about this less abstractly, for men to take full advantage of their dominant position, they must extinguish the arbitrary constraints that restrict them: the religion, the law, and social morality. Which leads us to ask, how can men continue to oppress women if they've destroyed the systems that are instrumental to such oppression?

Jane Gallop's essay "The Liberated Woman" draws connections between the American counterculture movement of the 1960's and what she calls de Sade's "liberated woman." By drawing on a popular critique of "free love," Gallop argues that the movement's intention to revolutionize the sexual expectations of women only freed them up to be

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[26] Horkheimer, 112.

[27] De Sade, 359.

[28] Horkheimer, 112.

totally available to men. For women, knocking down the constraints of wedlock and motherhood inevitably reconstructed them inside male desires and models.[29]

To exemplify this model, Gallop uses *Philosophy in the Bedroom* to detail the subtle ways in which male desire hinders any true female sexual abandonment. By using her own personal experience as a reader, Gallop posits that it is easy to assume that the women in *Philosophy* are liberated because translations of the text have failed to interpret the distinct presumptions about gender difference. To begin, in translating the text from *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* to "philosophy in the bedroom," the English translation avoids the gendering of the term "boudoir." Indeed, "boudoir" is defined as a "woman's private sitting room," or a place where a woman may "retire to be alone."[30] In its definition, the place suggests a special freedom from men. When the story opens, Madame Saint Ange is guiding Eugénie into her *boudoir* where they are certain "no one shall take it into *his* head to interrupt [them]."[31] Instead, the two women are surprised to find Dolmancé already waiting in an armchair to interfere with their lesson. For Gallop, this moment is emblematic of the subtle and pervasive ways that male desire, as a "philosophy," asserts itself in the moment when women try to educate other women: "The entrance of philosophy into the boudoir is thus represented as male penetration into female space, one which the women did not consent to—but which they very quickly accept and warm to."[32]

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[29] Jane Gallop, "The Liberated Woman," 92.

[30] Gallop, 92; "Boudoir, n." OED.

[31] De Sade, 195 (emphasis added).

[32] Gallop, 94.

Although I agree that the English translation is missing a key reference to the gendering of the text, this project does not think of de Sade and *Philosophy* quite in the same way. Gallop has noted how the original epigraph of the text—"The mother will prescribe the reading of this to her daughter"—implies that de Sade intended the text to be read to and by women. That is, after mothers subscribe to the philosophies of the text, they would then educate their daughters on the sexual freedom that liberates them all. This communication is intended to be relayed from woman to girl, a process that guarantees the male model of the sexually liberated woman continues to be passed down. The book becomes part of a pedagogical process that generationally shapes women as always sexually available to men. Although I agree that the text intends to teach, I think the epigraph can be read in a way that is not so straightforward. Beyond the female audience, I think that those Sadeian invested French men would still delight in the fantasy of a mother educating her daughter on sexual availability. Which means that the intended audience could plausibly be both men and women, both of whom are expected to learn what the book is trying to instill.

Certainly, the political content of *Philosophy,* particularly Dolmance's speech, implies that de Sade was less keen to appeal to a female audience. A line such as "never may there be granted to one sex the legitimate right to lay monopolizing hands upon the other" is immediately followed by its direct contradiction: "a woman existing in the purity of Nature's laws cannot allege, as justification for refusing herself to someone who desires her, the love she bears for another."[33] The non-monopolized woman faces the expectation that she remain sexually accessible. And yet if a woman refuses such access, men maintain

[33] De Sade, 318-319.

"the right to force from her this enjoyment".[34] What Dolmancé calls "temporary" contradictions are rhetorically integral to the satiric point of "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen." To think only about the erotic parts of the work is to miss the broader point that the work intends for all its readers, the social impossibility of a pure freedom that relies on force.

Like Gallop, I agree that de Sade uses women as a device to illuminate his philosophy. And yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer have posed, this philosophy is motivated by something broader than women and their sexual availability. The Oxford Reference defines a "boudoir" as a "room set aside for the lady of the house for informal activities such as reading."[35] Perhaps the title of de Sade's work is more conceptually rigorous and complex than we've given it credit for. If the pornographic content is intended to arouse the reader in the privacy of his or her own bedroom, perhaps the text is the *philosophy in our bedroom*. In this reading, we may not want to study Dolmancé as the symbol of "philosophy," nor distinguish the erotic from the political, instead, we may consider how the two forms play off one another. As I've said before, a large part of "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen," focuses on how men treat other men through acts of murder, calumny, and theft. These philosophical issues are centered around men as individual impulses that are permitted regardless if they are harmful to the larger social body. These references to men are not dilatory tactics, rather, they expose a form of thinking that is as preoccupied by class and other social positions as it is with gender. That is, the political is vital to the pornographic for it betrays a broader system of life that extends beyond organizations of

[34] De Sade, 319.

[35] "Boudoir, n." Oxford Reference Online.

gender. By questioning those harmful impulses that men are allowed to enact against other men, the work reveals a philosophy where gender is only the entry into an oppression much more absolute.

Similar to Gallop, Beverley Clack offers a feminist reading of *Philosophy* and female sexual violence. Clack proposes that de Sade saw himself as "a philosopher whose works provided a dramatic rendition of that philosophy."[36] This may be true. Nevertheless, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, de Sade shares his own form of thinking while pressing on the trouble of unbridled reasoning. In other words, de Sade is not simply a philosopher discharging ideas about sexual liberty. Instead, he is a French citizen cautioning against the egoism of natural philosophy:

> Let a simple philosopher introduce these new pupils to the inscrutable but wonderful sublimities of Nature; let him prove to them that awareness of a god, often highly dangerous to men, never contributed to their happiness, and that they will not be happier for acknowledging as a cause of what they do not understand, something they well understand even less; that it is far less essential to inquire into the workings of Nature than to enjoy her and obey her laws; that these laws are as wise as they are simple; that they are written in the hearts of all men and that it is but necessary to interrogate that heart to discern its principles.[37]

This Sadeian universe of irony and contradiction is intended to interrogate our own, to question the natural turned cultural assumption that "survival of the fittest . . . in practice, means survival of the strongest."[38] Myopically, nature's laws are simply "written in the hearts of all men," and no other form of collective reasoning, no consideration for long term sustainability, need be developed or obeyed. Clack points out how de Sade's works are in

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[36] Beverley Clack, "Violence and the Maternal," 275.

[37] De Sade, 304.

[38] Clack, 275.

tune with this picture of nature, as entropic but also generative, where "through destruction, new things are created."

With this in mind, I use *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to think about the implications of entropy, that is, how the play between destruction and rebirth, normally dictated by nature, is increasingly aggravated by men. My claim is that the "new things" created in this process of reproduction are inevitably slowed by a philosophical interference: the human presumption that the strongest individual is permitted to all things natural and available. Consequently, when men interfere with the natural cycle of degeneration and renewal, nature is no longer able to reproduce at the speed with which it is extirpated.

Clack posits that theorists, such as Roland Barthes, maintain a form of "irrealism" toward de Sade and his descriptions of sexual violence.[39] Yet, I'd like to reread the same passage from Barthes' *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* to examine whether or not Barthes "ignores the extent to which [de Sade offers] exaggerated forms of the kind of abuse to be found in actual human relationships,"[40] or perhaps, just frames human abuse differently:

> If some group conceived the desire to realise literally one of the orgies Sade describes . . . The Sadian [*sic*] scene would quickly be seen to be utterly unreal: the complexity of the combinations, the partners' contortions, the potency of ejaculation, and the victim's endurance all surpass human nature: one would need several arms, several skins, the body of an acrobat, and the ability to achieve orgasm *ad infinitum.*[41]

Clack argues that Barthes is distinguishing between the idea of sexual violence and its action, and that such distinction ignores the way action is formed through ideas and

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[39] Clack, 276.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Barthes, 136.

imagination.[42] On the contrary, it is the very idea of unsustainable action, supported by Barthes and illustrated by de Sade, that directs our attention to a more significant refusal made by humanity. Indeed, de Sade's picture of sexual excess utilizes every limb and orifice in the room. However, this abusing of bodies exemplifies the snubbing of nature's limits and bounds, that is, the bedroom becomes a place where real material things are exhausted in the human pursuit of the illusory and infinitely available.

Both Gallop and Clack offer sociocultural and psychoanalytic ways of reading female violence in de Sade. However, this paper resituates the female and the sexually violent within the material. De Sade's *Philosophy* draws us into the bedroom not to tell us but to *show* us a philosophy. He forces us to witness how the imaginary is made literal, how a society that ignores the divisive character in its own ideologies must eventually answer to its very real effects.

The crux between *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and de Sade is the excess of violence enacted unto women and the way these acts illuminate the period's brutal efforts toward all natural things. And yet, Adorno and Horkheimer do not address all the ways that de Sade uses violence to characterize man's ambition. Venereal disease is another form of violence that men wield in de Sade, and yet is different because of its ontological character. Disease, as an organic form, is pushing back against man, refashioning a clean order of dominance. This morbific matter is a form of correction, not just of men, but of all human life.

In this way, the material is detrimental to man's freedom. The specter of marriage and the specter of disease are linked in the way they determine and limit how men

[42] Clack, 277.

organize themselves as individuals in a collective. Both marriage and disease pose a threat to man's potential as a figure that has transcended nature, as a figure who has earned the right to claim and acquire things unapologetically.

Let us return for a moment to *Philosophy* in order to delineate how de Sade uses marriage to create a model for the loss of freedom. According to Dolmance's monologue, men have "no right to bind a woman to [themselves]" for "the exclusive possession of a woman is no less unjust than the possession of slaves."[43] Marriage is prompted by acquisition, by a self-interest in the partner, the goods, and the family. Such motivations force women—more importantly, men—into unjust attachments, and grant one sex the "legitimate right to lay monopolizing hands upon the other." Consequently, these notions of arbitrary force, possession, and claim are unnatural, but nonetheless principal, characteristics of marriage.

Throughout "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen," Dolmancé frames marriage, as well as love, as a form of privatization. Love is at the heart of the issue, for it is "*Self-interest, egoism* and *love* that degraded these primitive attitudes, at once so simple and so natural."[44] Love is fundamentally anti-republican in that it only serves the happiness of two people as opposed to the happiness of everyone.[45] What should be demolished is not simply the institution of marriage, but the organization of people. People should not be bound together in any sense by law or sentiment. Thus, to order couples by love would be to exclude the rest of society from taking pleasure in certain groups of people.

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[43] De Sade, 318.

[44] Ibid.

[45] De Sade, 319.

In short, organizing society through marriage or love is detrimental to the natural freedom that men assume. The republic must permit the exercise of impulses, regardless if they exceed the boundaries of what has been socially and legally established as morally "good" or "bad." The individual's desires are upheld as the most natural right in that they allow man to enact his full potential.

Much of Dolmance's "Yet Another Effort, Frenchman," focuses on issues of property and possession with marriage acting as a primary fetter to man's potential. Once the constraints of marriage are severed, all women will be released to all men. This natural right to pursue women includes the right to force sex on them, as one woman belongs to every man. The right "to compel their submission, not exclusively, for I should then be contradicting myself, but temporarily."[46] Of course, as I've pointed out before, de Sade intentionally undercuts his own point by offering one sex the right to the other (as long as it's only a little bit). This grey area directs us to a larger point: no man wants to share a woman with other men regardless if it's his natural right to have access to all women for enjoyment.

As Adorno and Horkheimer show, de Sade is pressing on the contradiction between common right and the right of the most powerful. That is, all men may have claim over women but not all men have the equal right to claim. And what motivates man to pursue nature, science, property, and women is the egoism that defines him as an individual rather than a collective. Yet, paradoxically, it is this same ambition that drives a particular group of men, characterized by their sex, race, class, and nationality, to seek total domination

[46] De Sade, 319.

against all *others*. It is their natural right, as the dominant group, to maintain a position toward everyone and everything as infinitely accessible and reserved only for them.

Commitments to this form of power manifest in the wake of the French Revolution, a period shaped by the will of people. De Sade, as well as many other writers, reveal how the new sociopolitical tactics of organization are out of touch as they are myopic. During the period, the French and the British governments began grappling with the potential of a republic, of a society that cannot rely on the organization of an aristocracy, and instead must find new ways to create and maintain order. The threat of the republic shifts the sovereign's focus from power over territory to power over its own population. Power, as Michel Foucault argues, "gave itself the function of administering life . . . it is over life that power establishes its domination."[47]

Nearly two centuries after de Sade, Foucault shows us how authority shifted in the eighteenth century and began to organize in ways that revolve around political and medical power. These practices produce what Foucault names, the *biopolitics* of population that "[organize] the body in relation to reproduction."[48] Although Foucault addresses biopolitics as a form of power shaped by social and medical institutions, I'd like to think about the ways that disease becomes its own form of power that threatens the way the social can be ordered. The following section attends to disease as a form of power that complicates philosophical tendencies to dominate and government trends of surveillance. Disease, in its material potential, becomes a reminder from nature, a threat to arbitrary forms of social and biological control.

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[47] Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, "Bodies," 25.

[48] Ibid.

Venereal Disease as Failed Reproduction and *Forced Freedom*

Let then those doctors, who love to play with shadows, and are fond of pursuing questions that cannot be answer'd, now enquire into the original bulk, figure, and disposition of the smallest atoms of the body to be changed; what new shape they ought to put on, in order to their change; by what force, artifice, and mechanism they can lay aside their old form and assume a new. —Jean Astruc, A Treatise of the Venereal Disease

At the end of *Philosophy in the Bedroom* there is a climactic moment of violence when Dolmancé enlists one of the other men to force Eugénie's mother, Madame de Mistival, into intercourse and instill her with venereal disease; Dolmancé declares, "this valet has one of the loveliest members to be found in all of Nature; however, it distills disease, for 'tis eaten by one of the most impressive cases of syphillis."[49] The valet rapes Eugénie's mother in order to transfer the disease and its violent long-term effects that will be a constant reminder to her: "so long as this cruel disease's impressions shall last, the whore will remember not to trouble her daughter when Eugénie has herself fucked."[50] Dolmancé addresses the valet's body and its disease as part of nature while also assuming that de Mistival's body will remain naturally receptive to this poison. The autonomy in this scene is not Dolmance's but the bodies'. Dolmancé is merely taking advantage of the way organic things are receptive to one another, group themselves together, and figure themselves into new forms. My point being, Dolmancé cannot will the disease out of the valet, he simply sets up the potential for contagion and then lets the bodies do the work.

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[49] Smith-Rosenberg, 25.

[50] De Sade, 362.

This lack of agency directs us to a new question: what is being overlooked in the pursuit to restructure and reorder life?

And yet, in typical Sadeian fashion, we are not afforded the time to mull over this question because the moment is not over. As quickly as Dolmancé summons the man to transfer the disease, de Mistival's daughter, Eugénie, agrees to sew up her mother's vagina to prevent "evaporation [and] leakage," so the disease will "more promptly cinder [her] bones."[51] The goal is that the destructive characteristic of syphilis will take hold of the body internally and quicken the natural corporeal process of disintegration, thus effecting disease's full potential:

> Eugenie— Excellent idea! Quickly, quickly, fetch me needle and thread!. . . Spread your thighs, Mamma, so I can stitch you together—so that you'll give me no more little brothers and sisters.[52]

In sewing up her mother's vagina, Eugénie is manually manipulating and degrading the site of reproduction. She is interfering with nature in hopes that she aggravates and sparks its most destructive qualities. Yet, her enthusiasm seems amiss, as if Eugénie misunderstands the way that nature is pervasive regardless of human interference—or perhaps she just doesn't care.

This scene is jarring both in the narrative and in our imaginations, as if de Sade is intentionally and forcefully directing our eyes to what society is failing to see. The sheer excess of brutal force coerces us to look at a link between nature and failed reproduction, a connection that shows how man been shortsighted in his will to overtake nature. More

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[51] De Sade, 363.

[52] Ibid.

explicitly, the individual who inflicts violence upon the material can be misguided by an impulse that thwarts the cycle of natural reproduction.

In the closing scene, de Mistival is led out of the house by the Chevalier, while we as readers are unsure if she is to live or die. The image becomes emblematic of an uncertainty that asks: if human violence overestimates the relationship between nature and reproduction, how does reproduction sustain itself, even partially, throughout man's quest to dominate? Although I doubt this question can be found in de Sade's works as excess is the very antithesis of sustainability, I will now turn to medical treatises in order to think about the subtle ways in which organic bodies persist against the motivations of human action.

Disease as a Biological Determinant

The epidemiology of disease, that is, the way it spreads in tireless and non-linear ways, is a way to think about disease as a collective power. In his medical treatise on venereal disease, French physician Jean Astruc notes that the substance of disease is "produced and perpetuated here by a sort of morbifick fewel. . .which is of a lasting nature, or rather is constantly renew'd."[53] The sheer endurance of this matter underwrites disease as a form of organic power—a power defined in its motion, in its ability to animate itself and animate other material forms regardless and in excess of the many sites it contacts. Consequently, the pervasive characteristics of disease shape it as an impermeable form. That is, a ceaseless form that will animate all human bodies in an active way that cannot be slowed nor fully stopped.

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[53] Astruc, xiii.

From this perspective, disease is a lively and energetic matter, clinging at random to different bodies at different times. It can be communicated in linear ways: between man and woman or from woman to infant. Yet, venereal disease is not exhausted in one exchange nor can it be traced through a tidy genealogy of recipients. Like the libertine ideal of spreading seeds to whomever, whenever, disease has no bounds. One of the few differences between the libertine ideal and this natural matter is exactly that, one is illusory and the other is real. What I mean here, is the success of disease is unparalleled regardless of an ideal pursuit, the more people who are in sexual contact with this destructive matter, the more paths disease will take.

Of course, the rake was very familiar with the power of disease, particularly the way that his pursuit is inevitably subsumed by his material reality. In Isaac Cruikshank's satirical poem, "The Dying Rake's Soliloquy," syphilis cannot be controlled and refuses to deteriorate. In fact, soliloquizing helps imagine how the body succumbs to illness even when the body is separated—by distance and time—from its initial source. Even after "appetites pall'd," all that remains is disease:

> When my health and my fortune to riot gave way,
> And my spirits and vigor felt total decay
> The doctors were sent for, who greedy of fees,
> Engag'd that their skill should remove the disease.[54]

The dying rake is comparing his own inorganic spirit to the organism of disease. When his body and money are spent, venereal disease is still at work. Of course, the poem parallels the corrupt rake who lives out his passions to the corrupt physician who profits off

[54] Little Isaac [Isaac Cruikshank], "The Dying Rake's Soliloquy," 52.

passions' effects. However, the poem also offers an example for the pure energy of disease. That is, the way that this sickness cannot be attended to by medicine nor the body itself:

> My carcase was sent to the vultures of *Bath.*
>
> When drench'd and well drain'd by the faculty there,
>
> All the hope that remain'd was to try *native* air.

The humanly form, though alive, becomes little more than a carcass: a lifeless container completely devoid of ambition, only lit up internally and relocating externally because of disease. Even as an organic substance, there is no way to slow this malady, so it must be offered to the wind and returned to its own physical cycle. This allusion to the grave becomes the final act for the rake, while his body is merely a rest stop for the infection. That said, the rake does not simply die, he succumbs to the relentless materiality of disease that effects a persistent and active process of dying. Even after he is gone, the physical properties of disease maintain its "spirit" across time, place, and bodies.

The dying rake shows us how disease becomes an ideal form of domination because it works continuously and independently from other bodies. In other words, the aggressive characteristics of syphilis will inflict the same harm on the human body as Dolmance's whips and flogs but do not require continuous wielding.

As a biological form, disease works on multiple parts of the body to "divide, break, and dissolve the *stamina* of the parts it falls upon."[55] In this process, the ailment works to breakdown the whole form by depleting the energy of individual parts. For instance, in de Sade's text, the woman may be dominated by a blow to the face or a whip to the back, but these single acts of violence inflicted on separate body parts are distinct from venereal

[55] Astruc, 145.

disease which, in one transmission, affects "the whole mass of humours."[56] Nevertheless, de Sade's characters continue to execute acts of violence with a ceaseless and tireless energy and no foreseeable end. The only intelligible part of their pursuit is the will to dominate, but to what end?

The excessive cruelty in de Sade illuminates a particular perspective of domination. The question: "to what end" becomes the very point of the text, so that even we as readers become tired engaging with these acts over and over. De Sade finds unexpected ways to remind us how we as individuals become exhausted while the violence does not. But one thing I have yet to address is how the hyper-sexualized and diseased female body is viewed as a "collective" body, or a body that stands in for all others; and, more importantly, how the violence of disease refashions this body in a way that reassigns power from the individual to the collective.

Disease as a Social Determinant

As I've said before, the sexualized and diseased woman is a recurring trope in eighteenth-century discourse. Culturally, we measure female sexuality by a social, cultural, and legal value. A woman's chastity assumes a certain lineage and thus guarantees proprietary rights for her husband and family. Because of this process, a woman's sexuality is never her own, but is instead a resource bound to others such as her father, husband, and children. And yet, when disease intervenes, it combusts all of the neat and tidy ways the state has organized society around the female body.

To be diseased is to be unclean and thus unfit for marriage and reproduction. The connection between the sexualized female body and society is indivisible. And yet, we can

[56] Astruc, 145.

begin to think about this connection more macroscopically, as Susan Sontag does when she identifies "a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness."[57] In this vein, when physicians of the period frame venereal disease as a "morbifick fewel originally brought from abroad,"[58] they are operating under a presumption that codifies the illness as *foreign*.

This view spurs a feeling of nationalism by pressing on the failing structures of intimate life. For instance, William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* famously illustrates the demise of Moll Hackabout, a country girl who couldn't make an honest living in London and thus succumbs to a life of harlotry. Yet, what really keeps Moll away from a virtuous life is more specifically gendered than just the city's corruption. Moll cannot participate in the required "sexual contract"[59] that underwrites women's participation in not just intimate life, but all of society; she cannot participate, that is, in a contract that legitimizes the female position by "civilizing" the natural woman. In Hogarth's engravings, disease manifests itself in material ways by spotting and scabbing the body of the woman. These markings of disease allude to a body whose validity has been spent, a woman who has waived her right to the sexual contract and must now exist outside the social sphere. To society, the physiological effects of disease, the signs of "corrupted matter,"[60] signify an *other,* an uncivilized body and thus a person who occupies a vulnerable social position.

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[57] Susan Matthews, "The Impurity of Diction," 71.

[58] Astruc, xiii.

[59] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract,* 11.

[60] Isaac Francis Nicholson, *The Modern Siphylis,* 31.

What is worse is how these weakened bodies invite further acts of violence, as society has already assumed they occupy a subordinate space. Moll Hackabout has already given up her social value, so symbolically, she has no legitimate place in civilization. She has relinquished her right to the private and domestic sphere which is the only space reserved for women in society. In this way, the harlot becomes a model for the way we think of the sexualized woman as natural and uncivilized: as weak, both culturally and philosophically. She is a figure that permits continuous acts of domination from whomever, whenever.

Yet, as I've already pointed out, weakness is not a measure of physical strength so much as it is a social position that women occupy. That is, weakness cannot be measured accurately in the face of force. In *The Social Contract,* Jean-Jacques Rousseau opens the section "The Right of the Strongest" by noting, "the strongest man is never strong enough to be master all the time, unless he transforms force into right and obedience into duty."[61] Thus, the "right" of the strongest is characterized in its ability to enforce others to obey. And those who yield, do so because of their socially weak position, not because of weakness itself: "Force is a physical power . . . To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will."[62] Rousseau's example of power is that which makes one continuously yield to force, "after all, the pistol in the robber's hand is undoubtedly a *power."*[63] However, a pistol implies a circumstantial power that can easily be violated if what it is used to get, can be concealed. Indeed, a pistol is a force, but power itself must be pervasive and inviolable. Thus, in order for a pistol to remain a power, it requires participation and reinforcement from a collective;

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[61] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* 53.

[62] Rousseau, 52.

[63] Rousseau, 53.

it depends on continuous standing and brandishing, until the pistol becomes a symbol of its systemic power.

But who is part of this collective and why must there be a collective at all? Paradoxically, the collective relies on the individual, on his need for self-preservation:

> Since men cannot create new forces, but merely combine and control those which already exist, the only way in which they can preserve themselves is by uniting their separate powers in a combination strong enough to overcome any resistance, uniting them so that their powers are directed by a single motive and act in concert.[64]

Rousseau helps delineate how men—as not just leaders of the republic but the republic itself—become a form of power. In addition to this, in the separation of church and state, men become the only legitimate power. Consequently, women will yield absolutely to the power of the republic, as the "duty of obedience is owed only to legitimate powers."[65]

Of course, Rousseau points out that there are few other forms of legitimate power aside from the republic, as legitimacy itself is defined by the state. That is, the social body determines to which powers we yield: "obey those in power . . . All power comes from God, I agree; but so does every disease, and no one forbids us to summon a physician."[66] Yet, what Rousseau seems to overlook in this moment is the physician's ability to aid *every* disease. How can disease not be considered a form of legitimate power if it holds the potential to make all men and thus the republic itself, yield to its force?

That being said, disease is unlike any other form of power, as it is not exclusive to men, nor women, nor any other living thing. The organic body does not have any autonomy

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[64] Rousseau, 62.

[65] Rousseau, 53.

[66] Ibid.

over the way it yields to disease. Disease itself dictates how it will live and move. In this way, neither men nor women have any true autonomy over how they wield this power. And yet, disease unexpectedly and paradoxically liberates women by becoming one of the few powers they can actually possess. When disease is communicated to the body of the woman, it still lives in the body of the man and holds potential to be passed to the body of a different man. Unlike whipping and flogging, disease offers women the opportunity to strike back. Of course, this is a shared power in that it is not exclusive to women, nor do women alone decide how they communicate this power. Instead, they must answer to the body.

Obeying the body becomes a way to think about how disease transforms women, from a site of power to a vector of power. Disease becomes a woman's entry into a more egalitarian society, a true republic where power is shared among men *and* women. A collective power that is always reinforced by the body itself: "That whoever refused to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free."[67] Disease becomes a form of *forced freedom.* A perverse form of liberation, a chance for women to give back as good as they've had it. And yet, nonetheless, still at the cost of their own life.

[67] Rousseau, 64.

Generational Violence in Blake's "London"

The Eternal Female groand! it was heard over all the Earth:
—William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Now we're going to turn, albeit briefly, to William Blake's "London." Although this poem is more commonly associated with institutional corruption and human suffering following the French Revolution, my hope is that we may read this poem differently, as a product of the libertine tradition. Unexpectedly, Blake's work is an alternative to answering the same kinds of questions I've been asking throughout this project. We may not normally associate Blake with libertinism, but I suggest that his work can be positioned among an ongoing libertine tradition. What I mean here, is that Blake is part of a libertine genealogy, a chain of male reproduction that is continuously producing a poetics of the body that is organizing around sexuality and disease. Here is the poem:

London

I wander thro' each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear—

How the Chimney-sweper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

There is a trend among writers such as Marquis de Sade, John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, and William Blake to address marriage and disease as a detriment to men. Blake would seem to be the outlier among the three, yet he fits within Adorno and Horkheimer's approximation of the libertine, as one who "reveals an organization of life as a whole which is deprived of any substantial goal."[68] A definition of libertinism that does not rely on pleasure so much as a pursuit to organize. Blake's works are another reflection of the period's tendency to use female sexuality and the female body as "methods of reproduction of the subjugated mass society."[69]

Blake is famous for his complicated relationship to social and corporeal organization. Tristanne Connolly suggests that Blake's art is preoccupied by images of birth

[68] Horkheimer, 88.

[69] Horkheimer, 87.

because it recognizes the limitations of physical existence,[70] an infinite organized into a body. That is, his illustrations press on how the body, in its natural processes, restrains and determines the life of man. Like the libertine writers, Blake values a nonreproductive sexuality,[71] a sexuality of abandonment rather than organized progress. Of course, Rochester, de Sade, and Blake are quite different in the ways they attend to sexuality and female reproduction, specifically in the way they address the literal and abstract material potential. Yet all three are part of a broader tradition that expands the possibilities of sexuality far beyond the reaches of social, legal, and moral boundaries.

In turning to the poem, I begin with the assumption that William Blake's poem "London," "insists on the visibility of the prostitute." Namely, that the harlot brings to the surface the things that London would rather forget.[72] Although I agree that Blake makes the harlot central to the poem, she does not bring to us anything that may be visualized. The visibility of the harlot is more dependent upon our hearing her than our seeing her. Lines such as "In every voice, in every ban, / The mind-forg'd manacles I hear—"[73] communicates suffering through sound. The cries of child chimney sweepers mark the "blackning Church" while the sighs from soldiers runs in blood "down palace walls."[74] The soldiers, the children, and the harlot are merely echoes, distant sounds that only materialize through other things.

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[70] Tristanne Connolly, *Blake and the Body*, xiii-xiv.

[71] Connolly, xiv.

[72] Matthews, 73.

[73] William Blake, "London," 41.7-8.

[74] Blake, 41.10-12.

Nevertheless, "London" still has visually stimulating moments that thrust us into the streets of London and force us to recognize the "Marks of weakness, marks of woe."[75] The signs of destruction manifest in response to noise, thus it is intentional that we hear "the youthful Harlots curse / Blasts the newborn Infants tear."[76] Namely, that the violence associated with the "blast" is characterized by an absence, rather than a presence. The corruption of London is brought to us in reverberations, through a loss or limited visibility.

This London is not organized in any real intelligible way, it is a cacophony of sounds, a material and temporal mess. Connolly points out that the mystical qualities of Blake's work are "metaphor from material existence."[77] Blake's artistic tendency to play with the natural and the abstract transfers seamlessly to his poetic form. If the "exterior should reflect the interior more literally," then the violent internal energy of disease would explode in tears from the infant's eyes. Sentiment and passion do not betray life quite like the physical: "the very lifeblood should be seen in the limbs."[78]

In keeping with this assumption of metaphorical existence, the harlot's external absence becomes an effect of the internal work of disease. Disease works to erase the harlot, to move her to the margins of the poem, so all that is left of her is *resonance*. In these terms, the echoes of her curse offer a metaphor for her material existence. For the ways in which disease works tirelessly to cinder her bones, to corrode her humours, to disorganize

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[75] Blake, 41.4.

[76] Blake, 41.14-15.

[77] Connolly, 40-41.

[78] Connolly, 42.

the female body from the inside to the outside until we hear only the residual sounds of her material existence.

This way of imagining violence is consistent throughout "London". This process connects the children, the soldiers, and the harlot by a broader form of violence that affects society as a whole. That is, the poem relies on the physical residue of ash, blood, and tears to signify an interconnected destruction. The harlot cannot participate in the visual sensation of Blake's poem because she has already been dissolved, materially annihilated.

Blake's mystical works, such as *The First Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Ahania* are exemplary in thinking about how the body is defined by nature: "shapes screaming flutter'd vain/ Some combin'd into muscles & glands / Some organs for craving and lust."[79] Figures may be "barr'd and petrify'd against the infinite," [80] however, the material body is determined in these restraints, in the way it organizes itself through nature's pursuit. But the material is not organized in "London," it is sprawling itself all over the buildings, dripping down the walls, leaving the borders of the body. It's as if nature's pursuit has finally yielded to the pursuit of the individual, the pursuit of the church, state, and humanity more broadly.

The infant of "London" provides a way to imagine the exhausted corporeality of nature. The infant is born into a similar universe as Urizen and Ahania, although admittedly not quite as supernatural, a universe that organizes without any substantial goals. Yet, the infant cannot be placed socially for his mother is gone, and cannot contain himself materially for he is bursting with tears and disease. Such disorganization posits him as

[79] Blake, "The Book of Ahania," 4.31-33.

[80] Blake, "Europe," 10.15.

unformed, both socially and materially. This unformation produces echoes that direct our attention to something lost while, at the same time, alludes to more violence to come.

"London" is a space where the individual has pulled forward from the collective and the natural, and thus has overestimated its own power. The signs of human egoism manifest as material cast-off, as bloody and ashy excess. The poem does not simply provide sociopolitical commentary, but prophecies a broader crisis to come. It has us looking for physical signs of the harlot, but only gives us the sound of her absence vibrating from the margins of the poem. These echoes become the sounds of dissonance, of a society complicit in the generational transference of violence.

Blake's "London" makes an inference to the material that has much more in common with Rochester and de Sade than one might expect. This libertine lineage is rooted in the relentless disorganization of power in the physical world. These works orient themselves through sexuality and violence, developing their ideas through material consumption, resistance, and finally, annulment. The works of Rochester, de Sade, and Blake are pressing on the continuous straining of the collective material body, a body corrupted by a pursuit so unnatural that it finally yields itself to the margins, giving itself away to man.

Conclusion

This project began as an attempt to redeem the sexualized woman of the eighteenth-century. Instead, it has stumbled through what I like to think of as an anti-redemption. I did not intend to frame disease as a profound and vital form nor do I deny that most forms of malady are often, and rightfully, thought to be destructive to life. But what I've found is that these destructive characteristics of disease offer vindication for the collective body, a chance for nature to push back against the atomized existence of the individual.

I'd like to return for a moment to my very initial question: what does it mean to be the vector of disease? To embody the metaphysical in one material form? This project has posited disease as a form of collective power, for its dependence upon numerous particles for formation, for its commitment to reproducing itself again and again in its contact with multiple bodies, and for the way it persists past the individual's existence. Unexpectedly, disease offers a thread with which we stitch together not just the social body, but the broader body of life. Life is texturized by the material human body, and it is disease that helps weave an organic fabric of particles, flesh, and sores. This visual form continues to move itself across time and space, shaping itself through a shared narrative, as colorful and material as any tapestry.

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